

Op-Ed for the Maine Sunday Telegram

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Being Smart about Windpower in Maine: Is Consensus Possible?

We have a conflict today in Maine between renewable energy development and natural resource protection. Recent debates about several wind power proposals (Kibby, Reddington, and Black Nubble Mtns.) have brought attention to differences between constituent groups.

On one side are those who raise concerns about habitat fragmentation, roads, invasive species, aesthetic blight, and direct mortality to birds and bats in particular. Many of their concerns are legitimate in that the resources at issue may well be adversely impacted by the proposed wind turbines, especially in sensitive habitat areas.

On the other side are wind power advocates, many state and local officials, and a combination of environmental groups that trumpet the need for additional, renewable energy sources in Maine to combat global warming.

Unlike the first collection of resource advocates, the second group has decided that the site-specific concerns about impacts to a particular species or habitat are less important than the larger-scale concerns about the earth itself.

They may advocate strongly for habitat protection in other contexts, but when it comes to wind permitting they say, “What good will it do to protect this habitat for a particular songbird if mean temperatures rise and the tree species required by this bird move north? We should instead make all efforts to reduce carbon emissions, and install this wind turbine, even in this sensitive habitat area.”

The first group, in turn, invoke Viet Nam and respond, “Yes, but it is illogical, ineffective, and plain wrong to destroy something or its habitat in order to save it! Yes, wind power in Maine is needed, but it should be reserved for ‘appropriate places.’ ”

This gulf has delayed several attempts to bring wind power to Maine and stands to stall many more – or even entirely discourage new wind power developers from initiating proposals *unless* consensus is reached about where new wind turbines may be sited.

The problem is that the “appropriate places” are yet to be defined. The most detailed geographic mapping to date is from the U.S. Department of Energy and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (for a map see http://www.eere.energy.gov/windandhydro/windpoweringamerica/maps_template.asp?sta teab=me). All involved in these discussions know that this map identifies two main regions as having high, utility-scale wind power potential: the offshore islands in bays and the Gulf of Maine, and the ridge crests in the north-central and northwestern Maine.

What is needed is greater specificity within these regions about areas that will be off-limits to wind power development. If it is true that some sites in Maine are too ecologically sensitive for wind installations, those sites need to be identified, and soon.

To achieve this, the contending groups need to develop a matrix of potential ecological impacts, and reach a consensus about the threshold where local, site-specific concerns are *so* great that they ought to outweigh the larger-scale concerns of global climate change.

The product of such a deliberative process would be two new geographic data sets: one that shows the places all can agree will have *no* wind development, and one that shows the remainder of the DOE's coverage for the State of Maine – which would then be made more readily available to potential wind power developers.

These products, especially if produced through a process endorsed by the state, could serve wind power developers and environmental groups in the same way other “no go” maps have in the past – such as with vernal pools, wetlands, and shorebird stopover sites. The key point is that permitting time would decrease dramatically because the majority of wrangling over whether a site is “appropriate” would already have occurred.

Time is of the essence. All studies to project power consumption in Maine suggest that significant new generation capacity will need to come on line each year from now through 2020, at least. At the current rate of megawatts of renewable energy permitted per year in Maine, unless such a consensus is reached in the near future, Mainers will by default rely on new fossil fuel generation to meet growing demand. Given what we now know about the impacts of climate change, this should not be viewed as an acceptable alternative – by either contending group or by anyone else.

Of course such a process won't be able to tackle *all* the details that will come up for any specific wind power proposal. Impacts on aesthetics, for example, will probably continue to be outside the ability of any scoring matrix or other decision-making tool to quantify in a way that will streamline permitting. Similarly, noise may always be an issue for turbines proposed within anyone's earshot.

For these concerns, one has to simply hope we are in the midst of a cultural shift, whereby wind turbines will come to be viewed with the same sense of inspiration, security, and identity that lighthouses along the New England coastline have always been. Lighthouses are symbols of safety, hope, strength, and prosperity (and are even insurance company logos).

In our common cultural mindset, wind turbines have the distinct potential to become similar beacons that represent national security, independence from foreign oil, effective environmental problem-solving, and local self-sufficiency. Perhaps someday soon we'll even observe a new psychological force driving local land use decisions in Maine: “turbine envy.”

Personally, even with advanced degrees in conservation biology and years working with both local land use permitting issues and renewable energy efforts in the private sector, I am uncertain where the threshold should be. I lean toward what seems an obvious societal imperative – that we must take *all* necessary steps to reduce carbon emissions lest unfathomable calamities descend. This includes calamities that ruin the very resource a person might try to protect by opposing a wind power proposal.

Does this mean every wind turbine proposed in adequate-wind areas should be permitted? No. Should most of them be? Perhaps, but today no one can reasonably make such a statement – the threshold of ecological sensitivities has not been examined closely enough.

The regulatory implications of a clear statement would obviously be enormous. Therefore, if we are to make such a statement as a state, we should do so only after a concerted and deliberative consensus-building process among all environmental and other groups in Maine with a stake in these issues.

There are models for this type of process in Maine, in our own recent experience. Fifteen years ago, under Governor John McKernan, Commissioner Dana Connors led the Maine Department of Transportation in a 6 month, facilitated public process involving no less than sixty organizations to develop a set of guidelines that require early public involvement in transportation planning and decisions.

While the rulemaking process was contentious, by the time Dana Connors hosted a series of statewide public meetings to present and discuss the results, there was universal acceptance of the product; not a single person stood in opposition to the proposed rules. The culmination was the successful, uncontested implementation Maine's landmark Sensible Transportation Policy Act.

Connors' action took courage and determination. His experience reminds us that when the stakes are high enough, we have the ability to achieve statewide consensus on a complex and contentious issue. Our inability to site wind turbines, at this particular moment in history when we know the consequences of inaction, presents us with one of these rare moments. The time to begin the process is now.

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